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ABSTRACT

The functional competencies of 131 women offenders incarcerated in Texas were assessed and than compared to the functional competencies of 868 free-world women in Texas surveyed during the Adult Performance Level (APL) Project. The findings support the following conclusions: (1) women in the free-world are more functionally competent than women offenders, (2) the needs of women offenders in the area of functional competency appear to far surpass those of free-world non-offender women, (3) whites are generally more functionally competent when tested on the performance of tasks which reflect cultural values similar to those held in the United States today, (4) there is a possibility of ethnic bias in the APL survey instrument, (5) there is a positive relationship between APL scores and educational level, (6) there is a possibility of an educational bias in the survey instrument, (7) there is no relationship between age and APL scores, (8) there is no relationship between APL scores and vocational education background, and (9) there is no relationship between criminal history and adult functional competency. (EM)

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A COMPARISON OF THE ADULT PERFORMANCE LEVELS OF WOMEN OFFENDERS IN THE TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS AND FREE-WORLD WOMEN IN TEXAS

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A COMPARISON OF THE ADULT PERFORMANCE LEVELS OF WOMEN OFFENDERS IN THE TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS AND FREE-WORLD WOMEN IN TEXAS

Introduction

An increasing awareness of and concern for what appeared to be a lack of adequate and effective treatment programs for women offenders incarcerated in the state of Texas prompted a study of the adult functional competencies of women incarcerated in the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC). This study was conducted to determine whether or not there were significant differences between the adult performance levels of women offenders and free-world women. This was done to verify the need for special attention to treatment curricula for the women incarcerates.

Though their numbers are increasing and appear large, women inmates make up only about 5% of the nation's incarcerated adult population. Their desperation is, therefore, not as obvious to society (Hovey, 1971). Increased per capita costs for custodial services leaves even less money for treatment/rehabilitation programs for inmates of smaller institutions; and, because of their comparatively small populations, the lack of rehabilitation funds is most severe in correctional institutions for women (Flynn, 1971; Gauper, 1970).

Sutherland and Cressey (1966) equate rehabilitation with education and call for basing prison education on inmates' needs and capacities. Offenders have special educational needs based on their past histories of school failure, their failure to cope successfully with the society in which they live, and their failure as criminals--which failure is evidenced by their having been caught. Their needs are not traditional and should not be treated as such (McKee, 1967). Adair (1964) reports a Texas Education Agency survey which reveals that 55.6% of all (male and female) inmates would be classified as functionally illiterate. Dell'Apa (1973) quotes an estimate that up to 25% of institution inmates are functional illiterates and up to 90% are school dropouts. If, as Wilkinson (1965) states, the majority of inmates are functionally illiterate and since 90% of them eventually return to society, the literacy levels at which they function must be raised.

A survey of directors of women's institutions quoted by Gahagan (1965) revealed that the directors strongly felt a definite need for socialization to take place along with academic and vocational skill acquisition.

> "In order to cope with today's complex social conditions, a functionally illiterate adult needs, in addition to the Three R's, to know about consumer education, citizen's rights, proper nutrition and health practices, orientation to the world of work, and coping skills needed to get along in society." (Veri, 1973, p. 167)

Historically, the effectiveness of treatment/rehabilitation programs has been evaluated by the number of offenders who have participated in such programs who do not return to prison subsequent to release. Although questions have recently arisen as to the appropriateness of using recidivism as a criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of treatment programs (Serrill, 1975; Mogal, 1969; Lipton, 1975; Glaser, 1964) penologists and educators continue to employ it--some almost exclusively. While it is necessary to acknowledge the multiplicity of factors which contribute to a person's ability or inability to live successfully in the free world, the kinds of skills encompassed in the scope of adult functional competency are vital to dealing effectively with life in our current society (Gahagan, 1965; Heffernan, 1972; Sandhu, 1974; Sutherland and Cressey, 1966; Veri, 1974; Wilkinson, 1965).

In 1974 the Adult Performance Level Project (APL) of the Industrial and Training Bureau of the Division of Extension, University of Texas at Austin, completed a national study of adult functional competency. The purpose of the study was to define and assess those functional skills (reading, writing, computation, and problem solving) and knowledge areas (occupational knowledge, government and law, health, consumer economics, and community resources) identified by previous research as being important for survival in our society. In 1974, the APL Project, funded by the Office of the Governor, Division of Planning and Coordination, and the Texas Education Agency undertook to conduct a survey of functional competency

in Texas. A representative sample of the state's population included 868 women and was surveyed to assess the functional competency of Texas adults and to provide a basis for comparison with the nationally normed functional competency levels. While the survey was conducted both nationally and at the state level, it provided no data regarding the functional competency of a specific group of adults--that group being women offenders incarcerated in the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC). At the time of the study, the Goree Unit of TDC was the only unit for women and was, therefore, selected as the data collection site.

Research Procedure

The purpose of this research was to assess the functional competencies of a sample of the Goree population and make comparisons between this group and the free-world women surveyed by the APL Project's Texas Study on the basis of functional competency as defined by the APL Project. The study also endeavored to determine if there were relationships between the APL scores of the Goree sample and certain demographic variables. To provide a basis for the study, the following hypotheses were tested:

Ho_1: There is no difference between the adult performance levels (as determined by the APL survey instrument) of female offenders and female non-offenders.

Ho_2: There is no relationship between adult performance levels and the ages of the subjects of this study.

Ho_3: There is no relationship between adult performance levels and the ethnicity of the subjects of this study.

Ho_4: There is no relationship between adult performance levels and the educational levels of the subjects of this study.

Ho_5: There is no relationship between adult performance levels and the vocational education backgrounds of the subjects of this study.

Ho_6: There is no relationship between adult performance levels and the criminal history of the subjects of this study.

In order to construct the first group, a random sample was generated by computer for the population at Goree. Of the sample of 245, only 131 inmates elected to participate in the study. The second group was composed of 868 non-offender women in Texas from whom data were collected by the APL Project staff. These data were generated for comparison with the Goree sample survey data.

The APL survey instrument was administered to the inmates in groups varying in size from five to twenty inmates over a six day period. The instrument used contained 67 test items designed to assess competency in five general

knowledge areas and four basic skill areas which were identified by the APL Project as being related to successful living. These areas are:

General Knowledge Areas

- Occupational Knowledge
- Consumer Economics
- Government and Law
- Community Resources
- Health

Basic Skill Areas

- Computation
- Reading
- Writing
- Problem Solving

The responses to the 67 test items were scored as correct or incorrect and, as an aggregate, yielded a single index of competency. The index or Overall APL score is defined as follows:

APL 1 - functionally "illiterate"

APL 2 - functionally "literate"

APL 3 - functionally "proficient"

In addition to the Overall APL score, a level of competency was determined for each of the basic skill and general knowledge areas. This competency level was also designated APL 1, APL 2, or APL 3. Demographic data were collected using a 16-item questionnaire composed of items similar to

those used by the APL Project and the National Study of Women's Correctional Programs.

In order to compare the adult performance levels of the two groups, a series of contingency tables and chi-square analyses was employed. The results yielded the chi-square statistic, its degrees of freedom and its significance probability. In order to determine if there was any relationship between the adult performance levels and the various demographic characteristics of the inmates, another series of contingency tables was used. Chi-square analyses yielded a chi-square statistic, its degrees of freedom, and its significance probability.

The representativeness of the Goree sample was tested by setting up contingency tables to compare the Goree sample to the Goree population on the bases of age, ethnicity, marital status, and educational level. The differences between the groups were not shown to be significant at the .05 level on the variables of age and marital status. However, on the variables of ethnicity and educational level, the differences between the groups were shown to be significant at the .05 level. Of those inmates who elected to participate in the survey, Whites and those with a higher educational level were over-represented.

The Goree sample and the free-world sample were also compared on the basis of the demographic variables of age, marital status, ethnicity, educational level, number of people in the house, and number of children in the house.

On all the variables, the differences between the two groups were observed to be significant at the .05 level.

Findings

Analysis of the data gathered for this study revealed that there were indeed differences between the adult performance levels of female offenders and female non-offenders. The findings indicated that differences between the two samples' APL scores on the basic skill and general knowledge areas as well as the Overall APL score were found to be significant at the .05 level.

Figures 1-10 display comparisons of competency levels in the general knowledge and basic skill areas and the Overall APL scores by presenting the percentages of each group which scored at each of the three competency levels. The data on the inmate and free-world test scores were used to calculate the percentages shown. The data were also analyzed and yielded the following test statistics for each of the ten areas.

Community Resources - (X^2=33.19, df=2, $p < 6.2005E-8$)

Health - (X^2=51.56, df=2, $p < 6.3606E-12$)

Government and Law - (X^2=26.12, df=2, $p < 2.1311E-6$)

Consumer Economics - (X^2=101.55, df=2, $p < 1.5266E-15$)

Occupational Knowledge - (X^2=40.87, df=2, $p < 1.9356E-9$)

Writing - (X^2=30.43, df=2, $p < 2.4666E-7$)

Computation - (X^2=71.344, df=2, $p < 2.3592E-15$)

Problem Solving - (X^2=58.425, df=2, $p < 2.0686E-13$)

Figure 1

Competency Levels for Community Resources

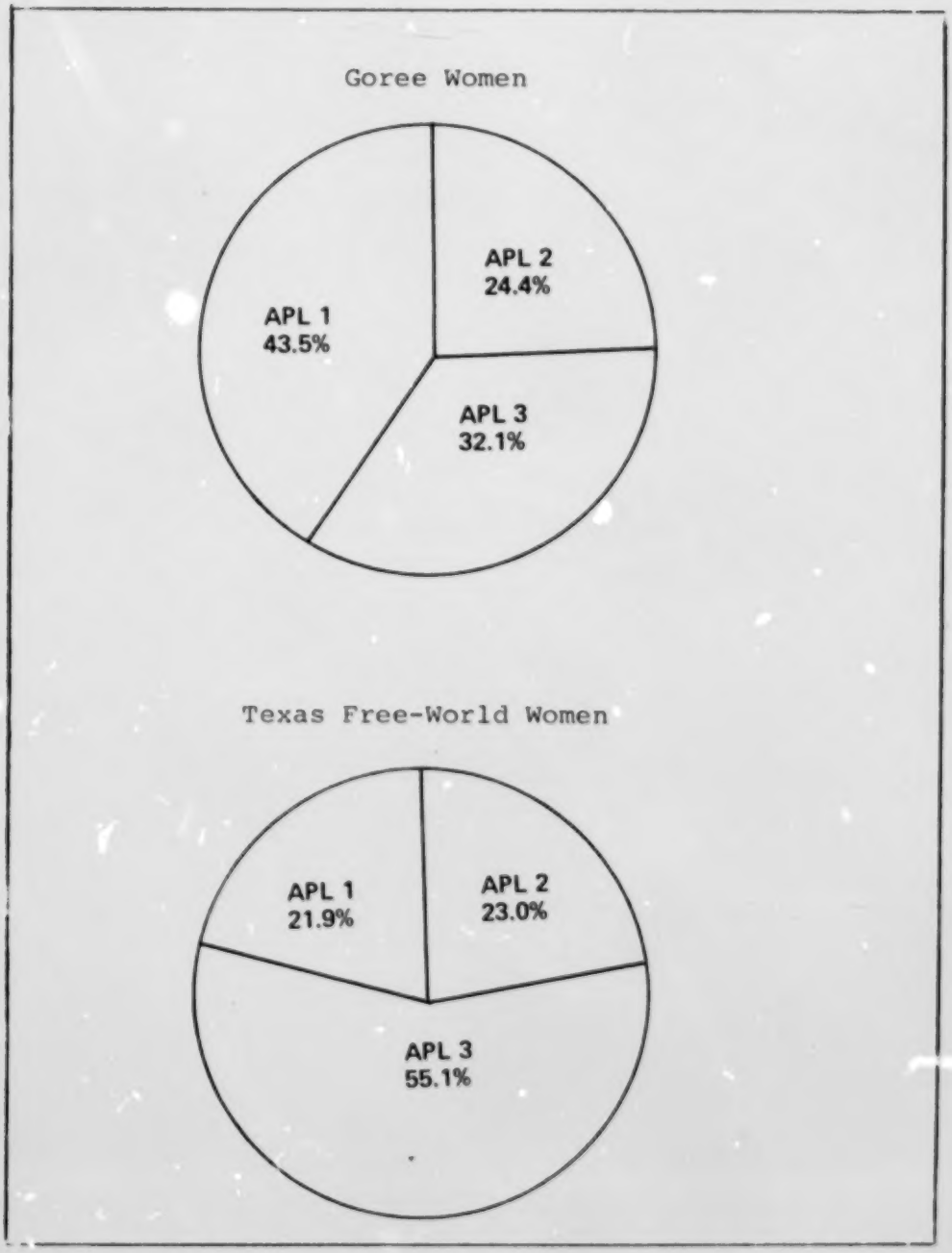


Figure 2

Competency Levels for Health

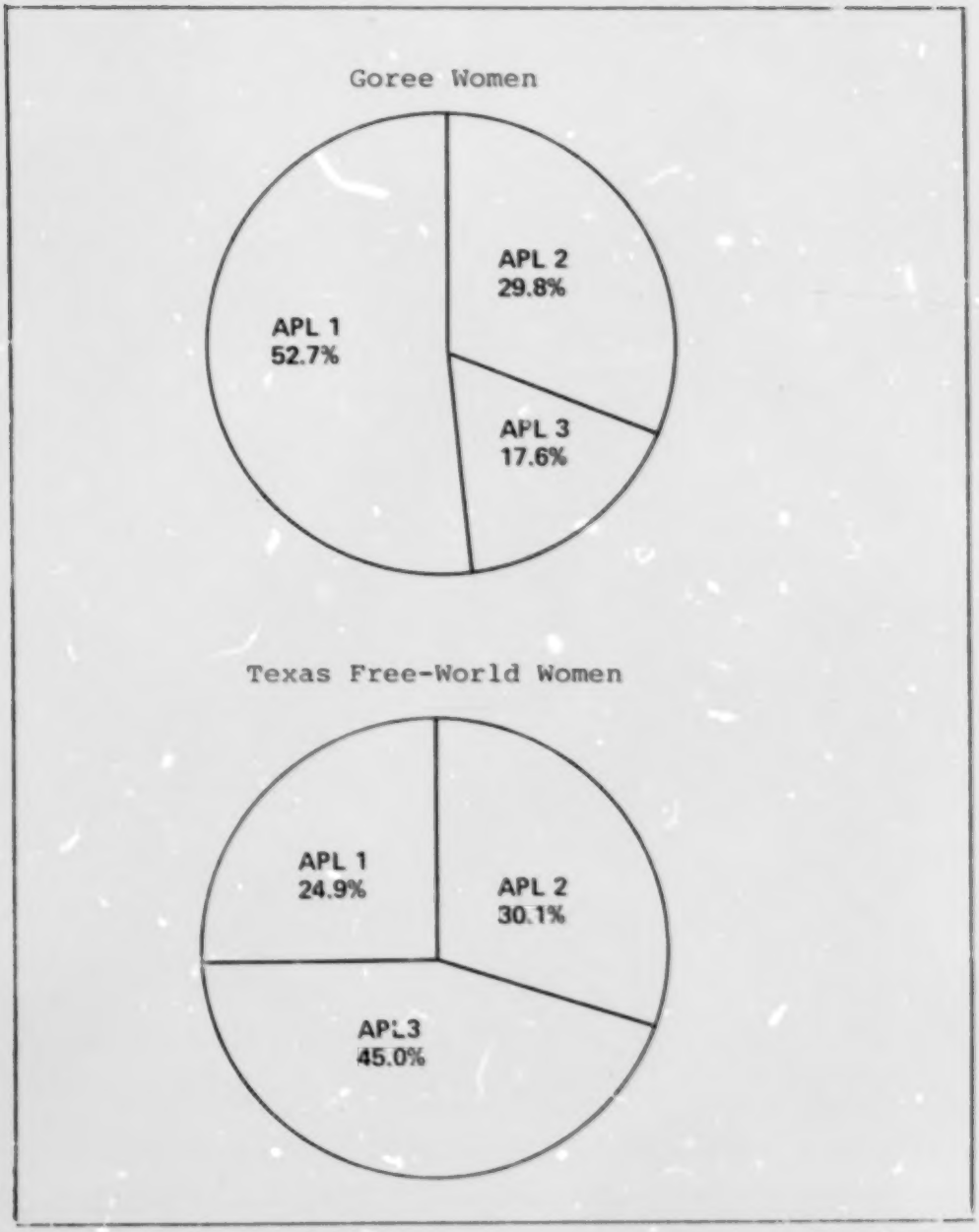


Figure 3

Competency Levels for Government and Law

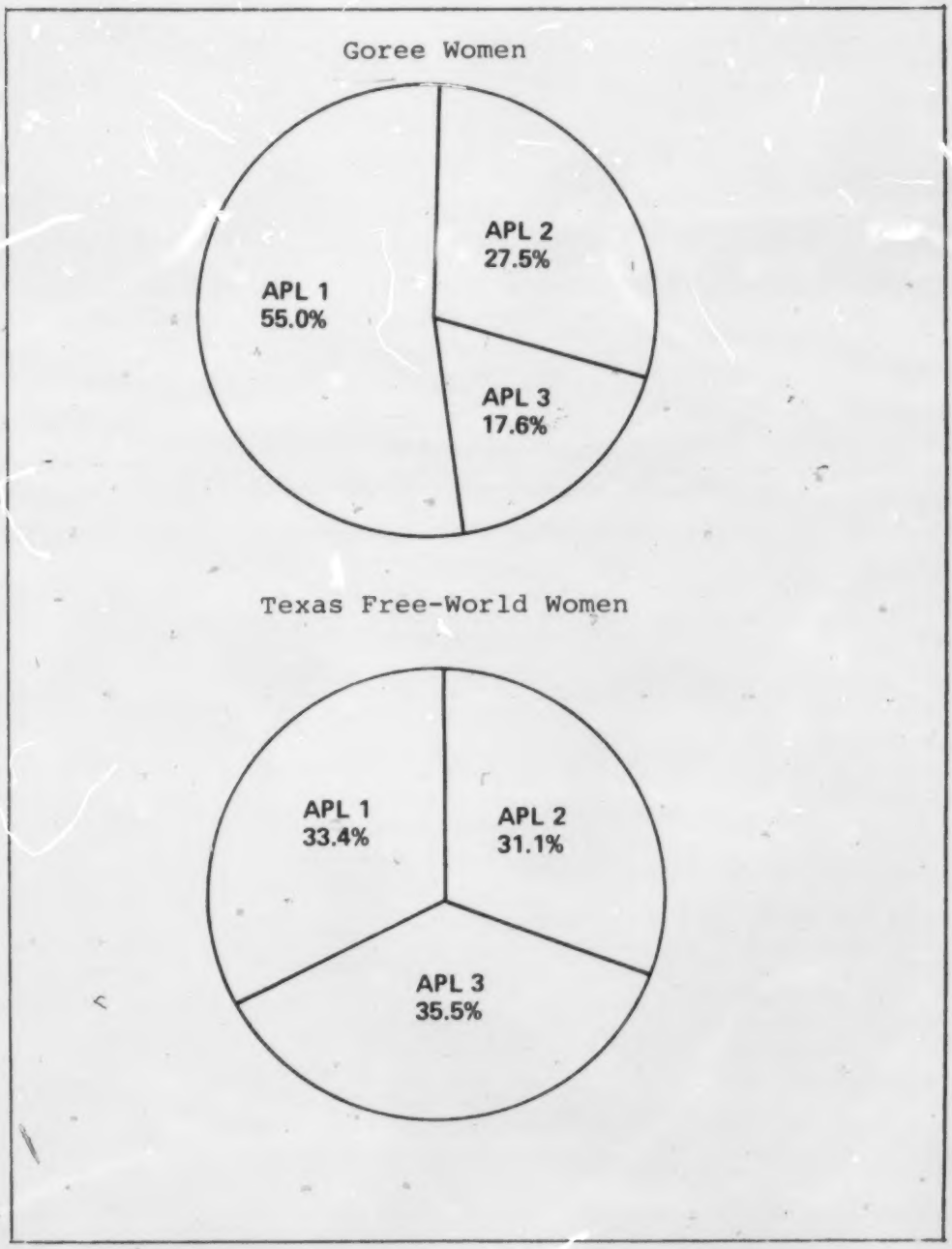


Figure 4

Competency Levels for Consumer Economics

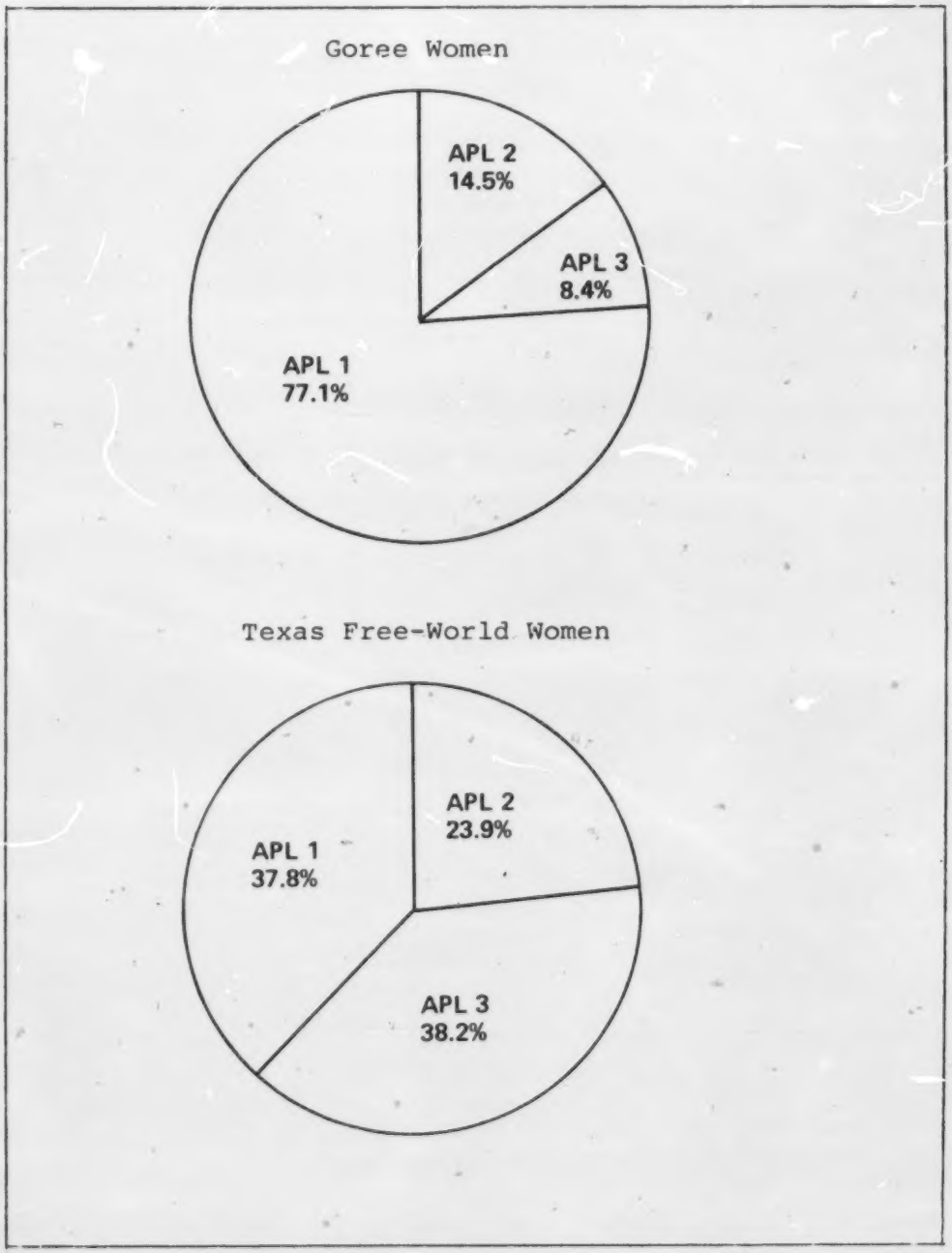


Figure 5

Competency Levels for Occupational Knowledge

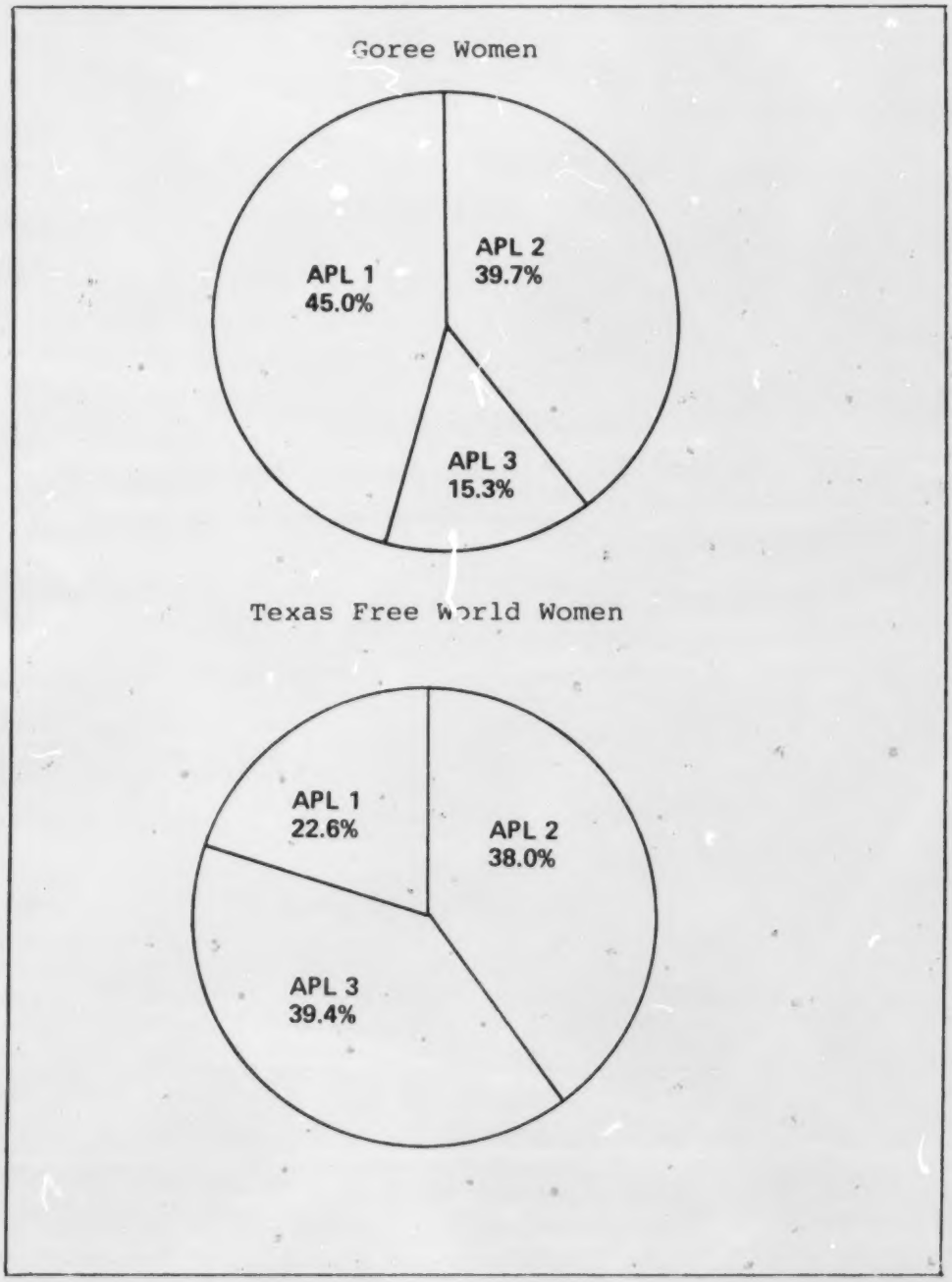


Figure 6

Competency Levels for Writing

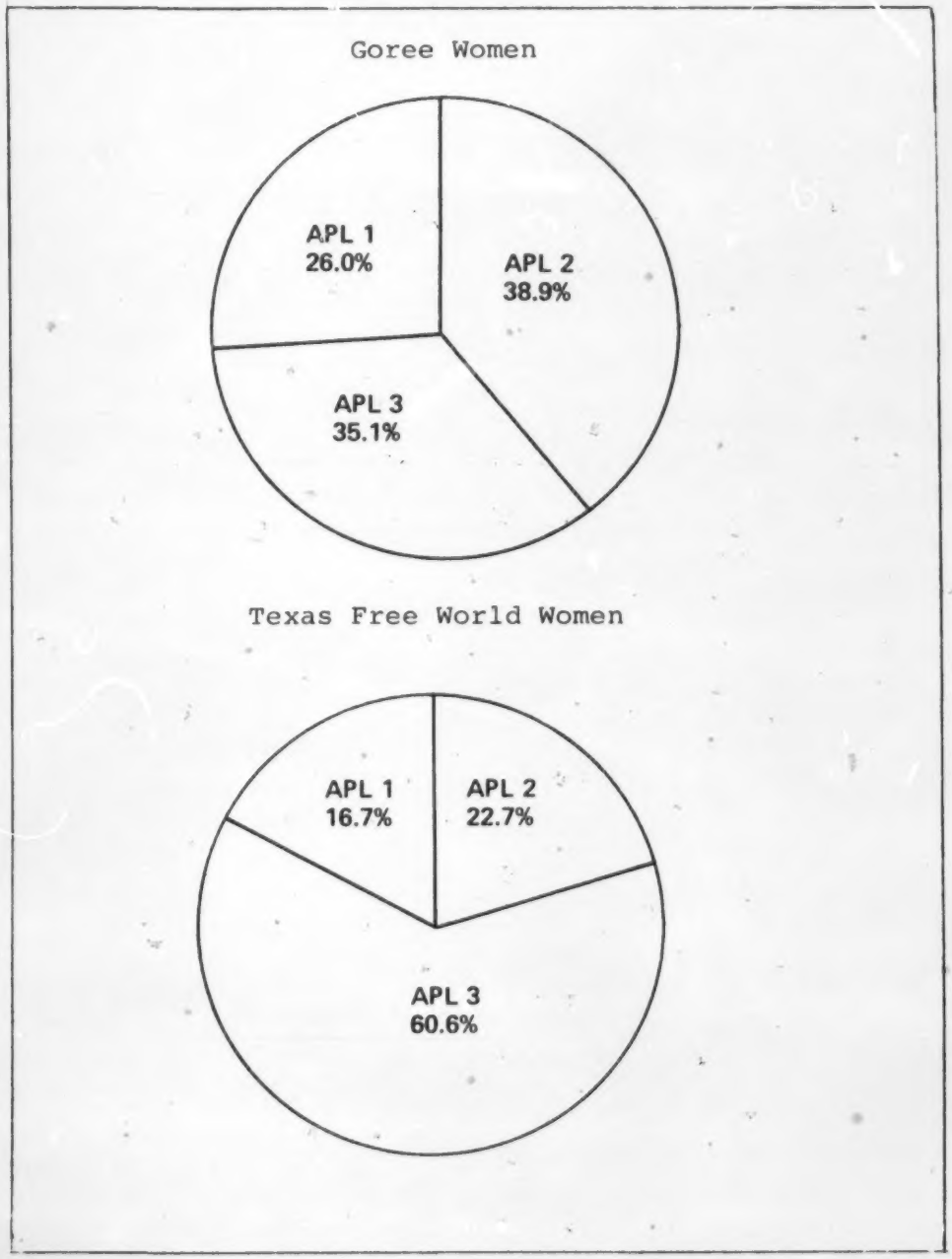


Figure 7

Competency Levels for Computation

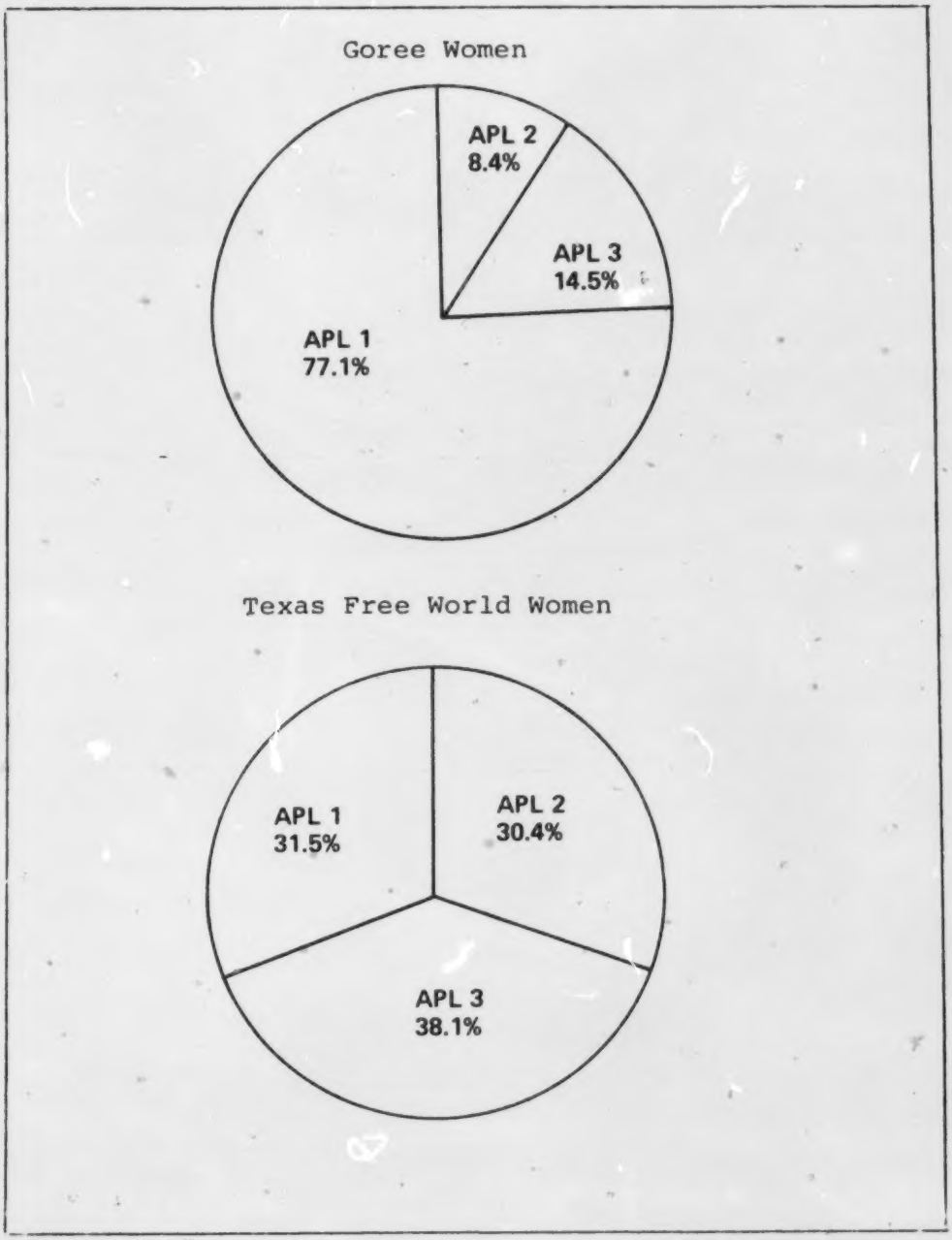


Figure 8

Competency Levels for Problem Solving

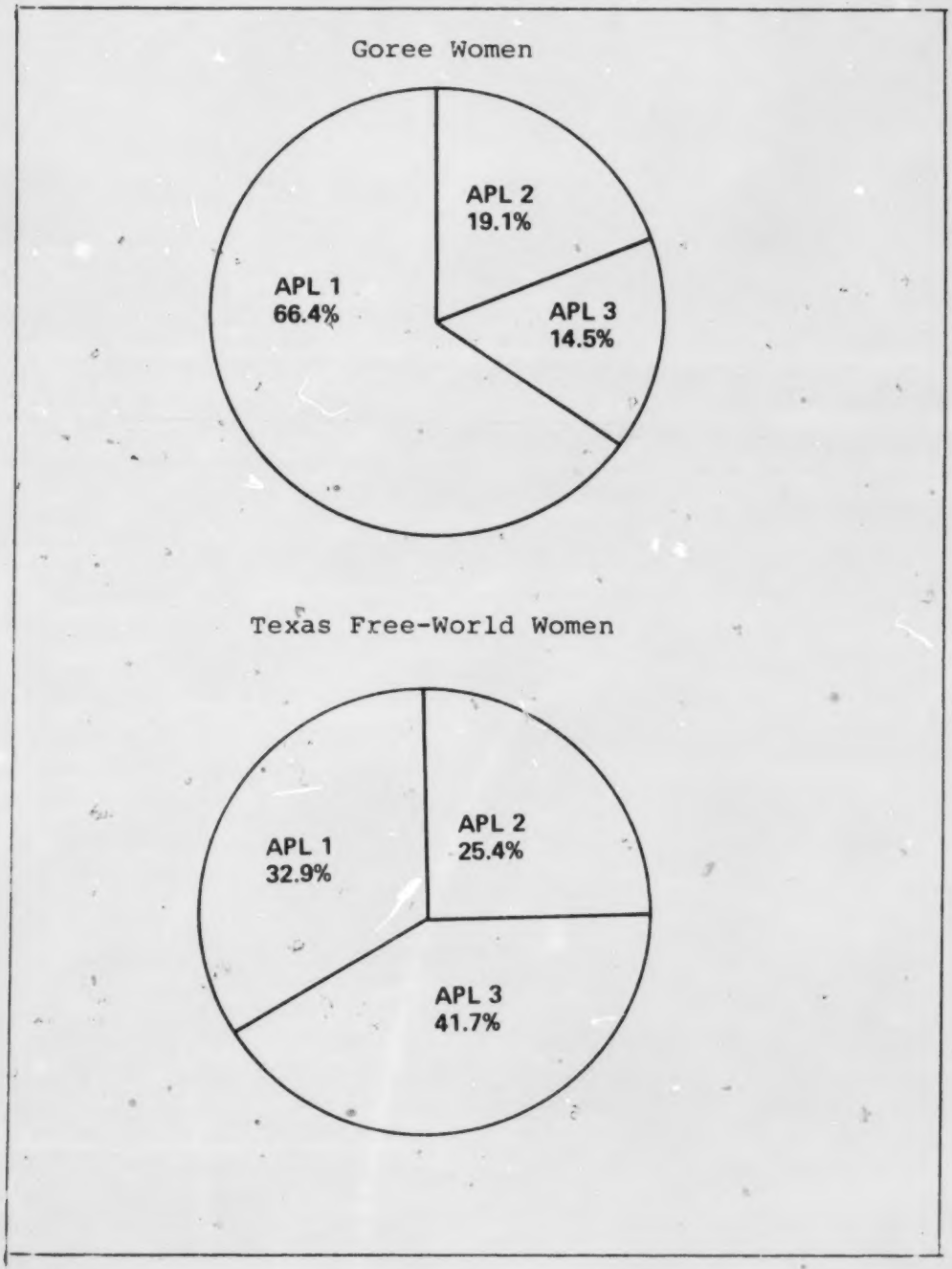


Figure 9

Competency Levels for Reading

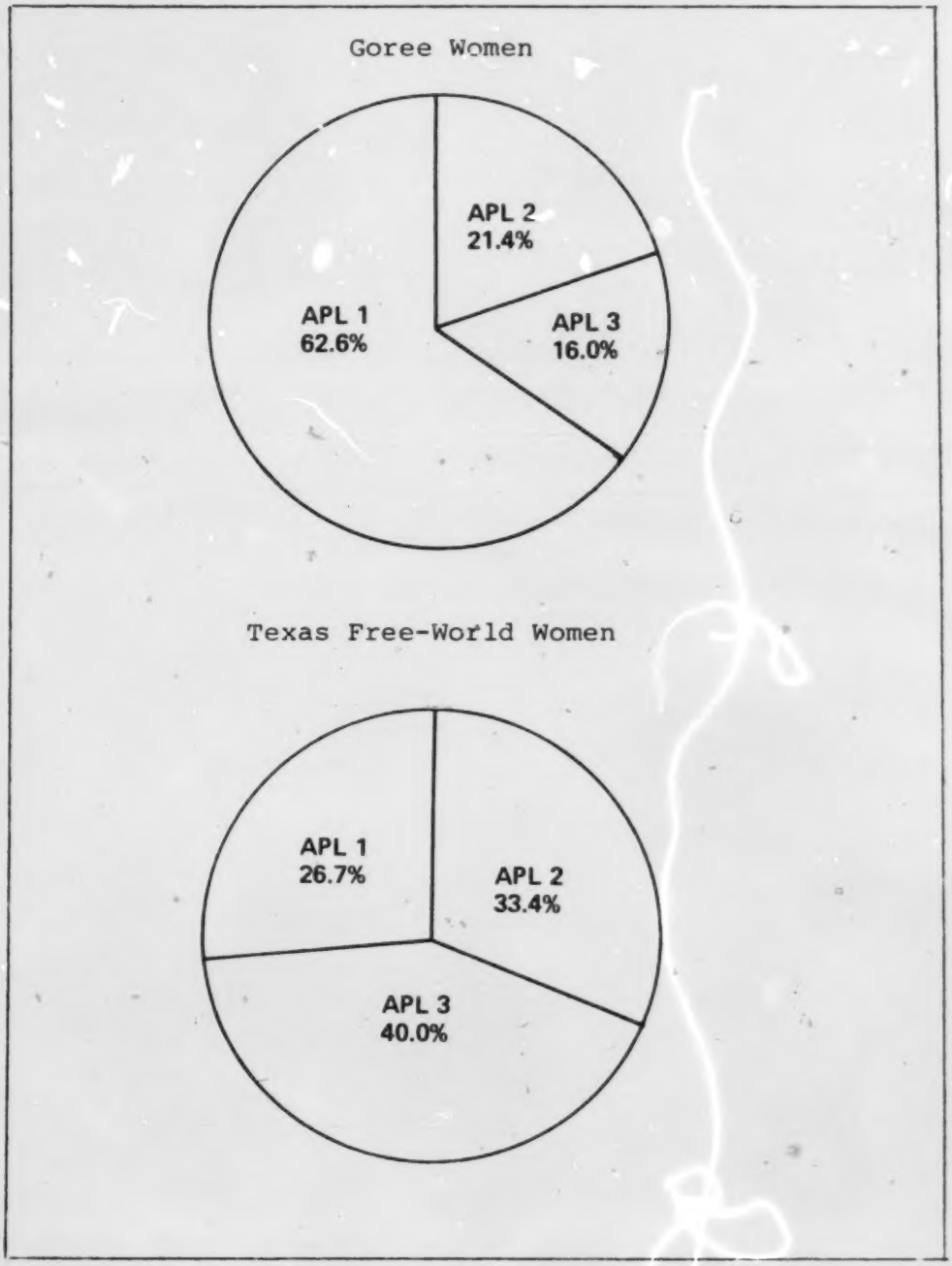
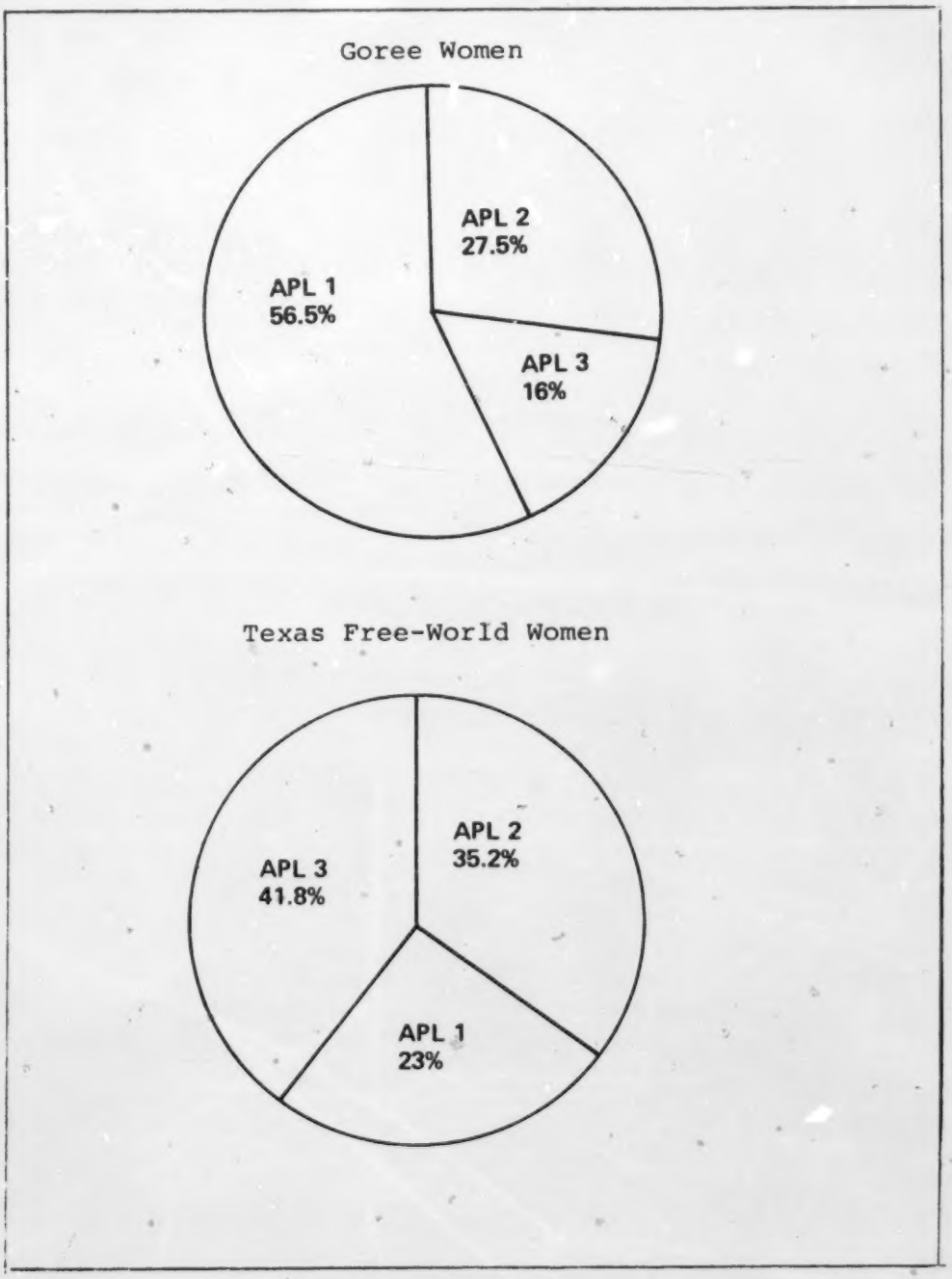


Figure 10

Competency Levels for Overall APL



Reading - (X^2=69.363, df=2, $p < 5.1903E-15$)

Overall APL Scores - (X^2=68.076, df=2, $p < 8.5487E-15$)

These data reveal that there are indeed significant differences between the groups' scores in all of the aforementioned areas. An examination of the data in Figures 1-10 reveals that the groups' scores are, in fact, not only different, but in most instances the distribution of scores at the two extremes of the APL index (APL 1 and APL 3) are approximately opposites of each other--are inverted. In fact, on all ten scores, there were, among the inmates, approximately twice as many APL 1's and half (or fewer) as many APL 3's as there were in the free-world sample. The groups were within 10 to 15 percentage points of each other in the number of APL 2's with the Goree sample having the smaller number of APL 2's.

The findings indicated that the variable "age" was not significantly related to any of the 10 APL scores. However, the statistic (X^2=15.444, df=10, $p < .051064$) resulting from the cross tabulation of the variable "age" and the general knowledge area "health" score was interestingly close to the .05 level of significance. There was a higher percentage (73%) of APL 3's in the 18-35 year age range than APL 1's (42%). However, there were more (57%) APL 1's in the over 35 range than APL 3's (26%). This finding may be related to the fact that knowledge in the area of health is learned and not acquired experientially and the older adults become, the less inclined they are to participate in structured

learning experiences (Brunner, 1959; Johnstone and Rivera, 1965).

The data indicated that the variable "ethnicity" was related to all 10 of the APL scores. Of the three major ethnic groups--Whites, Blacks, and Mexican Americans--Whites had consistently fewer APL 1's and more APL 3's than the other two groups in the general knowledge and basic skill areas as well as in the overall APL score. The chi-square statistic for the relationship of ethnicity to occupational knowledge was observed to be significant at the .0009 level; for consumer economics, the .0006 level; for government and law, the .0043 level; for health, the .0001 level; for reading, the .001 level; for problem solving, the .0000 level; for computation, the .0001 level; for writing, the .008 level; and, for the overall APL score, the statistic was observed to be significant at the .0000 level.

Survey findings indicated that the variable "educational level" is positively related to all 10 of the APL scores. Those achieving an Overall APL score of APL 3 had an educational level of 9th grade or above. Of the 20 inmates who scored APL 3, four had two or more years of post-secondary schooling. However, of the 74 APL 1's, 52 reported an educational level of 9th grade or above. The relationship of educational level to Overall APL score was observed to be significant at the .0001 level.

The results of the data analysis indicated that there was no significant relationship between the variable

"vocational education background" and the APL scores. The variable was composed of three sub-variables (1) Have you had any vocational education?, (2) Did you complete the training program?, and (3) What kind of training did you have? However, the statistic (X^2=23.63553, df=14, $p < .0507$) resulting from the cross tabulation of the basic skill area "reading" and the sub-variable "kind of vocational training" was close enough to significance at the .05 level to merit some attention here. The data show those inmates with training in business and cosmetology as having more APL 3 scores in the area of reading competency.

The variable "criminal history" was divided into the sub-variables: (1) kind of prior time served, (2) total length of time served, and (3) current offense. These sub-variables were not shown to be significantly related to any of the APL scores.

According to the findings as reported, there is a significant difference between the APL scores of the female offenders (Goree sample) and the female non-offenders (free-world sample). There is also a consistent relationship between all of the Goree sample's APL scores and the variables "ethnicity" and "educational level." However, any relationship between the APL scores and the remaining variables "age," "vocational education background," and "criminal history" was observed to be non-significant in the case of the Overall APL score as well as the five general knowledge area scores and the four basic skill area scores.

Conclusions and Implications

The contingency tables used in the analyses of the data indicated a difference between the APL scores of the two sample groups. The chi-square statistic used to test significance indicated a difference which was significant at the .0001 level. These results reject the hypothesis of no difference in the APL scores of the groups. Analysis of the data related to demographic variables and their relationship to the APL scores indicated a relationship between the variable "ethnicity" and the Overall APL score which was significant at the .0001 level. Also revealed was a relationship between the variable "educational level" and the Overall APL score which was significant at the .0001 level. These results reject the hypotheses of no relationship between the variables "ethnicity" and "educational level" and the APL scores of the Goree sample. The findings also reveal no significant relationship between the sample's APL scores and the variables "age," "vocational education background," and "criminal history." These results support the hypotheses that there is no relationship between APL scores and the variables "age," "vocational education background," and "criminal history."

The findings of this research and the conclusions which can be drawn are presented below. Also provided are the implications which the results of this research support.

1. Free-world non-offender women achieved higher APL scores than did women offenders. It can,

therefore, be concluded that (a) the women in the free-world are more functionally competent than women offenders, and (b) the needs of women offenders in the area of functional competency appear to far surpass those of free-world non-offender women. The implication supported by these conclusions is that a function of any treatment/rehabilitation program for offenders should involve the adaptation and implementation of a curriculum designed to teach the functional competencies identified by the APL Project as being related to a successful life.

The APL curriculum being designed by the APL Project will have to be modified to meet the identified needs of offenders. It will also need adaptation to accommodate the physical restraints imposed by the prison setting. Many of the tasks built into the curriculum such as opening a bank account, obtaining a library card, and doing comparative shopping could be easily adapted to the prison's imposed restraints.

2. The fact that Whites achieved higher APL scores than did members of the other ethnic groups represented leads to the conclusion that Whites are generally more functionally competent when tested on the performance of tasks which reflect cultural values similar to those held in the

United States today. The significant relationship between the variable "ethnicity" and APL scores implies the possibility of ethnic bias in the APL survey instrument. Also indicated is the need to consider the possibility of ethnic bias in interpreting the scores of the survey used to assess functional competency.

3. The results of the survey reveal a consistently significant relationship between APL scores and educational levels of the subjects. Specifically, all subjects who scored as APL 3's had a reported educational level of ninth grade or above; subjects who scored as APL 2's had a reported educational level of sixth grade or above; 70% of the subjects who scored as APL 1's had a reported educational level of ninth grade or above. One can conclude from this a positive relationship between APL score and educational level. Also implied herein is the possibility of an educational bias in the survey instrument. In other words, persons with more formal educational experiences are going to perform better on this test than those with limited educational experiences. This possible bias must also be considered when survey scores are being interpreted.

As observed by Adair (1964), there are generally discrepancies between the achieved grade

level reported by an inmate and the grade level as indicated by achievement tests. One might conclude then that grade advancements were made without learning having taken place. On the other hand, the inmates may have reported incorrect grade levels in the survey which made grade levels appear higher than was actually the case. These data support the implied need for the functional competencies necessary for successful living to be taught in public schools.

4. Younger subjects' failure to achieve significantly higher or lower scores than older subjects supports the conclusion that there is no relationship between age and APL scores.
5. The conclusion that no relationship exists between APL scores and vocational education background is supported by the data indicating that subjects who had experienced some vocational training did not achieve higher APL scores than those with no vocational education.
6. That the subjects' APL scores did not appear to be affected by their criminal history supports the conclusion that there is no relationship between criminal history and adult functional competency. There are in this conclusion implications for further research which will be discussed later.

7. Although no significant relationship was reported between the criminal history sub-variable "total length of time served," and APL scores, the greatest percentage of respondents at all APL levels were those who had spent a total time incarcerated of one year or less. This factor, however, is probably influenced by the self-selection of survey participants. It can be deduced that women who had served less time in prison would be less institutionalized and therefore more eager, than "long-termers" to participate in this type of study.
8. As was mentioned previously, the characteristic of being White and the variable "educational level" were positively related to APL scores. The Goree sample which participated in this study was over-represented with Whites and those of higher educational level. Yet, in spite of this over representation, the inmates' scores were dramatically inferior to those of the women in the free-world sample. These facts only further and more strongly support the needs of the inmates for the curriculum to teach the functional competencies which they lack.

Recommendations for Further Research

As a result of the findings of this study, the following recommendations for further research are strongly made:

1. The adaptation and implementation of the APL curriculum in a prison followed by an evaluation and follow-up study on those inmates who participated in the program prior to their release would yield valuable data. Such a study would provide answers to the following questions:
   a. Did participation in the program affect the releasees' employment and job retention ability? The particular emphasis for follow-up here would be on acquiring a job rather than job retention because of the plethora of other variables involved in job retention.
   b. Do programs affect recidivism rates of those who participated as opposed to those who did not?
   c. Did participation in programs affect the degree to which releasees were able to re-adapt to free-world living? This would involve consideration of other variables which might affect the ability to re-adapt to free-world living.
2. Some further questions can be identified as a result of this study. Additional research and data analysis should be directed to those questions.

a. Why did women offenders achieve lower APL scores than women non-offenders?

b. Is functional competency related to offender status, or is offender status a function of a lack of adult competency?

3. An exemplary project making participation in a program designed around the APL curriculum a condition of either probation and/or parole would reveal the affect of such a program on reducing further criminal behavior. Such programs ideally are designed not only as immediate alternatives to incarceration but also as a means of helping the subjects develop alternative life styles thereby preventing any further involvement in the criminal justice system.

4. Since 65% of those inmates who reported having entered vocational education programs also reported dropping out prior to completion, some attention should be given in future research to this subject. The following questions should be explored:

a. Did any of the subjects drop out of a vocational education program because of prior employability and therefore the ability to obain a job after enrolling in the program?

b. What factors were involved in their not completing their vocational education program?

c. How does vocational education affect or relate to adult performance level?

d. Does vocational education contribute to the raising of adult performance levels?

e. What implications does the concept of adult performance levels have for a vocational education curriculum?

This study was intended to resolve some questions about the applicability of the concepts contained in the Adult Performance Level study to female offenders. The study did, in fact, provide some answers, but it also raised some questions. Research like this is not designed to provide all of the alternative solutions to problems but, rather, attempts to deliver some solutions while identifying additional areas which need more research.

This research has, indeed, added to the body of knowledge about the performance of adults in society--specifically that segment of women behind the walls of a prison. It has also pointed the way for future studies that will aid society in dealing with the problem of criminal behavior as it relates to functional competency.

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